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## AN EXPLANATION OF ISAIAH 27. 8

BY SAMUEL DAICHES, Jews' College, London.

ISAIAH 27. 8, **בסאמא** בשלחה תריבנה הנה ברוחו הקשה ביום קדים, has been the despair of translators and commentators from the time of the Septuagint till the latest commentary on Isaiah (by G. B. Gray) published in 1912 (in *The International Critical Commentary*). The real meaning of this verse is unknown up to the present day. For a full discussion of its difficulties I must refer to the commentaries. For the various meanings ascribed to **בסאמא** see also the Hebrew dictionaries (especially the Oxford - Gesenius-Hebrew Lexicon, p. 684, and Eduard König, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, 1910, p. 297). It is especially the word **בסאמא** that has withstood all attempts at explanation and is the chief crux of the verse. G. B. Gray (in the commentary just mentioned, p. 456) leaves **בסאמא** untranslated (see also his notes on p. 457 f.).<sup>1</sup>

I should like to propose here an explanation which, I venture to think, will make the whole verse clear.

Let me take the first word (**בסאמא**) first.

There is in Assyrian a word *sassu*, the meaning of which has been regarded as unknown (see Meissner, *Supple-*

<sup>1</sup> Arnold B. Ehrlich in his note on this verse (in his *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel*, vol. IV, Leipzig, 1912, p. 96; see also his *Mikrā ki-Pshutō*, Berlin, 1901, vol. III, pp. 55 f.) says: 'Hier ist der erste Halbvers undeutbar, und alle bisher vorgeschlagenen Emendationen führen zu nichts Annehmbarem.' What he says there about 8 b is also entirely unacceptable.

ment zu den assyrischen Wörterbüchern, p. 73, and Muss-Arnolt, *A Concise Dictionary of the Assyrian language*, p. 773). From an Assyrian divination text, in which this word also occurs, it is clear that *sassu* must be a part of a corn-stalk. The text is contained in K. 2882 and is published in A. Boissier, *Choix de textes relatifs à la divination assyro-babylonienne*, vol. II, fascicule 1, pp. 59 ff. The first eleven lines of the Obverse speak of various trees, of their appearance, and of the consequences therefrom. From Obverse, l. 12, till Reverse, l. 14, the text speaks of what seem to be parts of the corn-stalk and of certain happenings to the field. Thus, for instance, ll. 12-13, read: (12) *šumma ūmi (šam) iš-te-en šu-ul-pu II III šu-bu-ul-la-tum* (13) *eklu šu-a-tum bēli-šu inadi-šu ugaru šuātu i-ḥar-ru-ub*. 'When one day the stalk<sup>2</sup> has two or three ears of corn, the field, its owner will leave it; that estate will become waste.' Similar omens are given in the following portion of the text. Now l. 3 of the Reverse reads thus: *šumma ūmi (šam) sa-as-su i-te-bi eklu šuātu NI. DUB-šu imatti(-ti)*. 'When one day the *sassu* rises, that field, its produce (?) will diminish.' Boissier leaves *sassu* untranslated. But it is clear from the preceding and following lines that *sassu* must signify a part of the corn-stalk. Furthermore, with the help of the Talmud and Midrash we can determine the exact meaning of *sassu*. In the Talmud and Midrash there occurs the word ססס (or ססס, see *Aruch completum*, vol. VI,

<sup>2</sup> Boissier leaves *šulpu* untranslated: but it must mean 'the stalk'. The stalk (at any rate the upper part of the stalk) was probably called *šulpu* because it contains the ear of corn which is plucked out from it. Cf. *šalāpu*, 'to draw out, to pull out' (see dictionaries of Delitzsch and Muss-Arnolt, s. v.), also Hebrew and Aramaic שָׁלַף 'to draw out, to pluck out'; cf. especially הַשְׁלִיף 'to pluck the last growth' (see Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim*, &c., s. v.).

p. 91). In the Babylonian Talmud, Soṭa 5 a, ראש שבלת (Job 24. 24 ב וראש שבלת ימלו) is explained by סאסא דשובלתא. It is clear from this passage that סאסא is the top-part of the corn-stalk. Rashi, *ad loc.*, commenting on סאסא דשובלתא, says: גבהו של שבלת שקורין זקן השבולת והוא נשבר ונופל מאליו 'the height (the high part) of the ear of corn which is called the beard of the ear of corn, and that breaks and falls off by itself'. Comp. also *Aruch completum*, *loc. cit.* In Kōheleth Rabba, s. v. שבתי (ch. 9, ver. 11), we find the following sentence: 'who ran on the tops of the ears of corn and they were not broken'. In Talmud, Hūllin 17 b, סאסא occurs alone (without שובלתא) in the meaning of the top of the ear of corn.<sup>3</sup>

We thus see that in Talmud and Midrash סאסא signifies the awns which rise from the sides of the ear of corn and reach a considerable height above it. The awns are especially high in barley, in which the 'beard' rising above the ear has more than double the height of the ear. Of wheat there are two varieties: one with awns (called 'bearded wheat') and one without awns (called 'beardless wheat'). The beard of the wheat rising above the ear is not so high as that of the barley. Rashi's description of סאסא as 'the beard of the ear of corn' is practically identical with the modern designation of that, the highest, part of the stalk. A simpler designation is 'the top of the ear of corn'.

I have no doubt that the Assyrian *sassu* is identical with the Talmudic and Midrashic סאסא and also signifies

<sup>3</sup> The reading of the passage in Echa Rabbati, where סאסא is supposed to occur (see Levy, *Neuhebräisches und chaldäisches Wörterbuch*, vol. III, p. 462, and the printed editions of the Midrash) is doubtful (see *Aruch completum*, vol. VI, p. 31, col. 2, s. v. סס, and S. Buber, *Midrash Echa Rabbati*, Wilna, 1899, p. 78, note 381).

*the top of the ear of corn.* Line 3 of the Obverse of the Assyrian text quoted above is therefore to be translated: 'When one day *the top of the ear of corn* rises, that field, its produce(?) will diminish'. The corresponding words in the preceding lines (from Obv., l. 12) and in the following lines must clearly also refer to various parts of the corn-stalk.

Now I suggest that in **בסמסמ** we have the Hebrew word identical with the Assyrian *sassu* and the Talmudic and Midrashic **סמסמ**. **בסמסמה** (rather **בסמסמה**) is therefore to be translated: 'in the top of its ear of corn'.

**בשלחה** (or, better, **בְּשִׁלְחָהּ**) I translate 'in its shooting stalk'. We have here the word **שָׁלַח** in the meaning of 'sprout, shoot' (comp. Cant. 4. 13, perhaps also Ezek. 31. 5; see the Oxford Hebrew Lexicon, p. 1019). **שָׁלַח** can no doubt mean 'a stalk', just as it can mean 'a branch': something that sprouts, that shoots up. *Ḳimḥi*, *ad loc.*, just mentions the possibility of the connexion of **בשלחה** with **שלחך** in Cant. 4. 13, although he speaks there of 'gardens and fields of corn'.

**הנה** is generally translated 'he removed' (see already *Ḳimḥi*, *ad loc.*). It may be that we have here the root **הנה** 'to moan, to growl'. 'To moan (or to murmur, to sigh) in (or through, with) his wind' is probably a phrase for 'to sweep over with his wind'. When a strong wind passes, it is as if it would moan or howl. We speak of 'the howling wind'. Instead of saying 'the fierce wind moaned', the prophet says 'He (God) moaned in (or with) his fierce wind'. In Job 37. 2 **הנה** is used for the growling sound of the thunder (**והנה מפיו יצא**); comp. the Oxford Hebrew Lexicon, p. 211. If we take **הנה** to mean 'he moaned, he howled', then it is also clear why there is no object after it (see commentaries).

Now, I suggest, the prophet had the following picture before his eyes: a field full of corn which is swept by a severe east wind. The east wind in Palestine is destructive of vegetation and may carry everything before it. For a description of the disastrous effects of the Palestinian east wind (the *sirocco*) see G. A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, pp. 67-9; Driver on Amos 4. 9, and Gray, *l.c.*, p. 458. It is 'withering and burning the growing corn that no animal will touch a blade of it' (see Driver, *l.c.*). Ordinarily, the prophet implies, the whole field would have been devastated. Not a trace of its corn would have been left. Not so in this case. Only the tops of the ears of corn were carried away. Only the shooting stalks were withered. But (we must supplement) everything was not destroyed. The root remained. And out of the root new corn will grow up.

The cornfield, of course, represents Israel. A severe visitation will come over Israel. God will punish it almost mercilessly. But He will not entirely destroy it. While Israel's smiters were destroyed root and branch (ver. 7), Israel will only be destroyed in its branches. Its root will remain. We have this idea very often in Isaiah (comp. especially 6. 13) and in other prophets.

In ch. 27 we have several agricultural pictures. At the beginning Israel is compared with a vineyard. In ver. 6 we have *ישרש*, *יציץ* ופרח, and *תנובה*, in ver. 11 *יבש קצירה*, and in ver. 12 *יחבט* and *חלקטו* (in ver. 12 *שבלת* may also mean 'ear of corn'; see commentaries). We need not therefore be surprised if we have in ver. 8 also an agricultural picture. Once the meaning of *בסאמסא* is established, and consequently also the meaning of *בשלחה*, the whole sense of the verse becomes perfectly clear. The suffix ה in both

words refers to the field which the prophet has before his eyes and to which Israel is compared.

The verb ריב (תריבנה) is used because the prophet is aware at the moment of speaking that the field is Israel, and that God contending with Israel punishes it (although God can also have a dispute with a vineyard ; comp. ch. 5).

I therefore translate this verse as follows :

‘In the top of its ear of corn, in its shooting stalk (only) thou contendest with it (and destroyest it, the field); he (God) has growled (swept) with his fierce wind (over the field) on the day of the east wind.’

The larger number of Israel will be swept away. But a remnant will be saved. Ver. 9 gives the reason for the salvation of the remnant. Vers. 10 and 11 practically correspond to ver. 8, and the pictures of these two verses are akin to the picture in ver. 8 (וכלה סעפיה ביבש קצירה) (תשברנה נשים באות מאירות אותה). In vers. 12-13 the remnants are gathered up.

I believe that the explanation proposed here for Isa. 27. 8 is entirely satisfactory and removes one of the greatest difficulties of the Biblical text.